
Program Brief

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**“Georgia and the War on Terrorism”
A Nixon Center Seminar with Charles King
Assistant Professor and Ion Ratiu Chair of Romanian Studies, Georgetown
University**

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The Nixon Center, Washington, DC

At a recent luncheon at The Nixon Center, Charles King, a noted expert on Georgia, expressed skepticism about the potential outcome of U.S. policy in Georgia, particularly in regard to American military assistance under the train-and-equip program. Dr. King, Assistant Professor and Ion Ratiu Chair of Romanian Studies at Georgetown University, also expressed serious doubts about Eduard Shevardnadze and his government’s commitment to implementing political and economics reforms in Georgia. Center Director Paul J. Saunders moderated the session.

As Mr. Saunders pointed out in the opening remarks, Georgia has been an important part of U.S. strategy in the former Soviet Union over the last ten years. Despite a nearly \$900 million American investment, however, the results of U.S. involvement have been mixed at best. Now, due largely to geography alone, Georgia has become a focal point for the anti-terrorism coalition led by the United States. However, Mr. Saunders noted, the countries with interests in the region – notably the U.S., Russia, and Georgia itself – seem to have competing, if not

conflicting, objectives which are certain to complicate U.S. efforts.

Georgia’s Internal Weakness

Dr. King stressed the importance of recognizing that this new attention on Georgia is addressing a number of longstanding problems that have confronted the U.S. and its allies over the last decade. The principal source of these persisting issues is the chronic weakness of the state itself, King asserted. Today, in fact, twenty percent of Georgian territory is controlled by entities other than the Georgian central government. Some regions, like the Pankisi Gorge, on Georgia’s northeast border with Chechnya, are characterized by an absence of state institutions and general lawlessness.

This weakness, King explained, is manifested in the persistence of longstanding territorial disputes in Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia. In King’s view, these two unrecognized states have moved significantly closer to the Russian Federation in the wake of the announcement of U.S. troop involvement on the ground in

Georgia, bringing more tensions to Georgian-Russian relations. These continuous problems are exacerbated by a few brewing conflicts, particularly in Georgia's Armenian-dominated South, where the central government is conspicuous by its absence. King emphasized that the repercussions of U.S. involvement can be grave, as these conflicts are escalating in regions of Georgia where economic development and ethnic problems persist.

According to Dr. King, the absence of state institutions and effective impotence of the central state over much of Georgian territory poses obstacles for the allies in the war on terrorism. These challenges are compounded, King said, by the corruption in the Georgian government, which is not interested in addressing these problems. He stated that efforts to stabilize the region by the United States, the UN, and other outside actors have far outstripped the willingness on the ground in Georgia to address any of these problems. King argued that this reluctance stems from the benefits the Georgian government derives from the status quo, rather than its inability to resolve its internal conflicts. More frustrating, however, is the fact that Georgia's weakness has persisted for nearly a decade despite substantial assistance from the U.S. and its allies.

The Train-and-Equip Program

Dr. King was quite pessimistic about the prospects that the train-and-equip program would resolve the Pankisi Gorge situation. He conceded that this military assistance may serve the immediate interests of the U.S., but stated that it will not solve the fundamental problem: Georgia will remain a weak state, unable to control its own borders. King further argued that the military assistance program is insufficient to address Georgia's very complex problems and emphasized the necessity of linking it with various aid programs such as an anti-corruption campaign and humanitarian assistance for internally displaced people. "There needs to be an overall strategy," King insisted, rather than

seeking an easy answer by providing military training and equipment to a state that does not even have a monopoly on force in its territory.

King stressed that the American military assistance must be properly and effectively targeted. The Georgian military, at 12,000 troops, is largely inconsequential and by no means a source of power and force for the central government. And while the interior ministry and police forces, which number between 30,000 and 40,000, are far stronger, King believes these entities to be as responsible for the crisis in Pankisi Gorge as the "so-called terrorists." According to Dr. King, people abducted in the Gorge actually have identified Georgian police officers rather than Chechen terrorists as their kidnappers. For the train-and-equip program to succeed, King emphasized, proper targeting of its resources must be accompanied by a thorough reform of all of Georgia's security services.

An additional concern is that the equipment provided under the train-and-equip program may be used in the future to the detriment of regional security, noted King. He stated that there is no mechanism to guarantee that these weapons will not be used by Georgia against Abkhazia, despite President Bush's assurances to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Ivanov. He felt, however, that even with American help, the Georgian forces would not be able to defeat the Abkhaz. Hence, there exists the potential for further strains of Georgian-Russian relations, and for a renewed escalation of violence within Georgia's borders.

Dr. King emphasized the need for more careful consideration of the goals of the train-and-equip program, whether its objectives are realistic, and if its consequences are acceptable. If the goal of the program is to resolve the Pankisi Gorge crisis, the ability of the Georgian army to succeed without the participation of U.S. or Russian troops is highly doubtful, King stated. The prospects for genuine reform of the Georgian military, which King believes vital for the train-and-equip program to have any impact, are not promising either, given the Georgian

government's clear preference for status quo. King argued that even if the conflict is resolved, the Chechen refugees are sent home, and the Al Qaeda fighters are chased out, Georgia's fundamental problem – chronically weak state institutions – will remain.

Reassessing the “Paragon of Democracy”

According to Dr. King, Georgia has taken steps backwards in terms of democratization despite a decade of attention and expenditures on the part of the United States – including assistance in 2000 that was six times the U.S. aid per capita received by Ukraine. King asserted that the West's overestimation of Shevardnadze's ability to institute genuine reforms and inflation of his personal commitment to democracy created an illusion of Georgia that did not coincide with reality. Portrayed as the “paragon of democracy” throughout the 1990s, Georgia is only now being viewed realistically.

In King's view, it is truly “unfortunate” that this overdue reevaluation of Georgian domestic politics comes at a time when a *stable* Georgia is essential to the efforts in the war on terrorism. “We're entering a period now where more domestic political instability on the national level is probably on the cart,” Mr. King said, citing another reason the current troop involvement and assistance program have to be handled extremely delicately. The party system, the parliament, and the highest levels of domestic politics are in the midst of major changes, as the largest pro-presidential party of Georgia, the Citizen's Union of Georgia (CUG) has effectively crumbled. According to King, the next six months, in the run-up to parliamentary elections and, later, the end of Shevardnadze's final term, will be crucial.

Dr. King believes that real change may be possible after Shevardnadze and his government have departed the scene. Even though his potential successors – Zurab Zhvania, the parliamentary chairman, and Mikheil Saakashvili, the former Justice Minister – have

made their careers within the Georgian political system, King noted they have a reputation for being “relatively clean” of the corruption that characterizes the current government. Although their chances for success are uncertain, as they have not yet established their own bases of support, King pointed out that this is the first opportunity in a decade for such critical changes to take place.

This Program Brief was prepared by Nixon Center intern Natalya Katsap.

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